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Dam controversies: contested governance and developmental discourse on the Ethiopian Omo River dam

State mega-infrastructure projects in developing countries evoke challenges to citizenship and reconstruct the imagery of statecraft. The Ethiopian government's construction of a large dam in the Omo River evoked contesting accounts of development and legitimate governance among a variety of actors. Debates between relevant actors centre on classic topoi of the 'development' discourse but present seemingly irreconcilable views. In the process, discourses of technocratic expertise claiming to evade 'politics' as well as culturally grounded socio-economic narratives are mobilised. They are juxtaposed here to develop an anthropological interpretation of the discursive positions, connecting the analysis to a consideration of precarious citizenship and coercive state consolidation in Ethiopia.

Key words dam building, ethnic conflict, 'development', modernism, state-making

Introduction

This paper discusses some socio-cultural aspects of 'high-modernist' projects in Ethiopia. James Scott's (1998) term is as relevant as ever in today's globalising world, where developing countries have taken over an unreconstructed modernism in their infrastructural and technocratic approach to socio-economic development. While this brief account does not aim to provide a major new contribution to social theory, I advance the argument that evolving modernist governance modes in developing countries like Ethiopia reinvent modes of coercive state legitimacy by grounding their political practices in global developmental discourse that reflects the practices and power strategies of elite institutions and 'donor country' governments. In the process, the subjects and citizens of developing countries are seen as entities whose political agency and identity are to be neutralised or overcome in a technocratic discourse of developmentalism that allows no counter-voice. Large infrastructural projects in many countries now appear to be the 'ideal' manner in which to realise this and to ground or extend the authority and 'legitimacy' of the state and redefine citizens' status in terms of dependency and 'displaceability'. In the Ethiopian case discussed here, the state is recast as a strong 'developmental state', similar to those seen in Asia in the 1970s–90s but with a notable extension of surveillance techniques, combining classic policing with military as well as new technological (ICT) means, and ideologically

anchored in a discourse of technocratic developmentalism. The development path outlined by the Ethiopian party state elite is not seen as open to critical debate or alternatives, and does not allow scope for different cultural registers. In its effects, this phenomenon resembles the classic case described in Ferguson's (1990) oft-cited study on Lesotho, but this time more comprehensive, as the state – while acting quintessentially political – denies its own political role and the very contestability of its policies.

An anthropological approach to dam impacts (building on the contributions of Scudder 2005; Johnston and Gracia-Downing 2004 or Campregher 2010) not only needs to highlight the observable effects such as displacement, livelihood loss and social decline, but also the dissonances in cultural discourse around dam constructions as state infrastructural engineering feats incapable of incorporating views and interests of local people, who often have a long-established relationship to the land in the socio-economic and ritual sense.

I present the outlines of a multi-vocal debate on modernist engineering in Ethiopia and assess its political and policy contexts. I do this by presenting a brief descriptive overview of the several modes or genres of discourse that one can discern in Ethiopia around the building of the large Gibe III dam in the Omo River, and connect them to developmental, state building and governance issues. My interpretation is that the disparity between those discourses – as social and historically situated forms of presentation of reality, reflecting power and/or hegemonic claims of emerging parties involved – tends to increase. This makes negotiated compromises, to be established in discursive spaces delineated by international law, impossible. The positions are seen to be incommensurable, driven by either monopolising claims to power and 'being right' from the side of governments and the international financial and development institutions, as well as activist organisations principally opposed to such grand engineering. Independent academic observers and researchers constitute a fourth group, usually not entrenching itself in taking position. A fifth party, the local people directly impacted by the schemes, is seldom heard, because they are inaccessible, ignored in research or in reporting, shielded off by the government, or sometimes not even aware (informed) yet of what exactly is happening. In the course of this paper I will discuss these five forms of 'discourse' that I think can be distinguished, and specifically reflect on the perception of citizens, in this case local people in the project areas, as 'dispensable', as surplus populations to be resettled, moved or shifted around as part of the national project of (re)building the state and consolidating its power (cf. Li 2009, 2010).

My aim in this article is not primarily to bring a judgment on whether schemes like the Gibe III dam are beneficial or disastrous for development and economic growth and people's well-being: it is foremost to show the problematic interplay of discursively antagonistic parties on an issue of major public interest, as well as to highlight the production of images of 'dispensability' of state citizens, happening in the wake of economic-modernist projects conceived on the national level and not on that of the everyday life of citizens and common people in a negotiated social order. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that dominant political practice of the main players, notably the Ethiopian state, *may* have deleterious effects on local development, livelihoods and political and human rights of the people in the areas discussed.

The damming of Ethiopia as a feature in state building

Africa has currently more than 1270 dams, and after a backlash in the 1980s, when the disadvantages of dams and their aftermath were being taken seriously, a new era of large-scale dam construction seems to have been started (Richter *et al.* 2010: 16). The World Bank, the African Development Bank and obviously African governments are in the forefront of resuscitating this effort. In 1998 a World Commission on Dams was founded for the purpose of monitoring this.

Ethiopia is one of the enthusiastic participants in massive dam building. Poverty, socio-economic 'backwardness' and material underdevelopment can, in the view of the state elite, be decisively pushed back by grand schemes of energy infrastructure building imposed from above. The building of dams all over the country is one crucial element in this effort, next to large-scale agrarian land leases to foreign investors (and sometimes they are connected, for example when grand post-dam irrigation schemes are proposed, see below). In the past 20 years – since the post-Marxist EPRDF party came to power in 1991 after a civil war – dams and hydropower stations have been built or expanded in a significant way¹, like the Tendaho, the Tekkeze and the T'ana Beles. But the new Gibe dam cascade, consisting of a projected five big dams on the Gibe-Omo River in Southwest Ethiopia, beats all. And even additional dams – beyond the Gibe dams – have been announced in the 25-year master plan of 2003.² The Ethiopian government has shown a perhaps inordinate desire to build these dams and seems to push the donor community and global financial institutions into supporting this venture financially and ideologically as being beneficial for development.

Dam building also has connections with the other hot issue in Africa: land access and large-scale (foreign) land acquisitions, because: (a) much of the land used by downstream peoples on the banks of the Omo River will no longer be inundated and exploited by flood retreat cultivation, an intricate and essential supplementary food resource for the local people, and (b) the water collected in the huge lake reservoirs behind the Gibe III dam (and the future Gibe IV dam) is advertised to be used for large-scale irrigation on lands to be given out to (foreign) investors, near the dam lake and in some downstream areas and that are envisaged to import tens of thousands of foreign workers as well.

The two-pronged approach to development was outlined in the Ethiopian government's various development plans. The fact that these ambitious plans exist already makes a good impression on the donor community and the World Bank and creates goodwill, but often leads to naive or unwarranted assumptions among these

1 Some of them started under previous regimes, such as the Gibe I, Alwero and Tekkeze, dams and the Finch'a hydroelectric power station. The T'ana Beles hydropower station that started in May 2010 is producing below capacity (460 MW) because of reduced water flows caused by drought. The resettlement consequences of T'ana Beles were negative (cf. Gebre 2009) and the adverse effects on Lake T'ana are also problematic. Tekkeze is also precarious and not in optimal use either. The Gibe II hydropower plant (a turbine tunnel structure) faced serious problems in 2010 due to tunnel collapse and was still not fully operational in mid-2011.

2 Others are the Chemoga Yeda (five smaller dams on Blue Nile tributaries) and Genale Dawa (two dams on the Genale river, between Oromiya and Somali regional states), with more to come. The largest of all is to be the 'Millennium' or recently renamed 'Renaissance' dam on the Blue Nile. It was started in 2010 and is to be financed by Ethiopia itself via 'voluntary contributions' and bonds to be bought by the Ethiopian public (notably state employees, many of whom had to donate one month of salary for it). The plan for building it has in 2011 caused tensions with Egypt.

donors about the actual processes of implementation, financing, and social and political effects of the plans. For example, in the 2003 74-page *Rural Development Policy and Strategies* document, large-scale agricultural development was announced, much of it via foreign investments. In 2010 a new development plan, the *Growth and Transformation Plan* (GTP), was promulgated, a managerial blueprint with many good points though strongly infused with the 'revolutionary democratic' ideology of the ruling party EPRDF, which sees itself as the vanguard party solely able to direct the national development effort, on the basis of a political model of top-down implementation and wholesale re-engineering of Ethiopian rural society (i.e. of smallholder farming and pastoralism).

The massive and ambitious investment in the national energy structure via mega-dams is seen as a key strategy both to generate electricity for domestic economic growth and for the country to become energy-independent and even an exporter of hydropower. Built and ideally financed largely by foreign parties, among them China, the Ethiopian government hereby escapes domestic accountability pressures and can act politically independently. Nevertheless, there is a likelihood of tensions being created not only between local communities and the state but also on the international political level. Local opinion in Ethiopia is divided on the need for such a massive debt-generating investment in energy structures, for which there is as yet no domestic demand (and no sufficient national grid). In addition, and not surprising in view of what is known about the effects of mega-dams worldwide, social costs as well as group tensions will likely follow the construction of the dams: forced resettlement, decline of quality of life and well-being, more water-borne diseases, loss of productive land and incomes, more local group competition, not to speak of cultural and heritage loss. While beneficial effects of dams for directly affected local people can in the long run of course not be excluded, the advantages will first and foremost be on the national level: the sale of dam energy abroad (planned by the government) is estimated to yield hundreds of millions of US dollars annually, rivalling the revenue of coffee, the largest export crop. This is in the expectation that neighbouring countries will continue to need and buy the power for the coming decades, and also that rainfall over the Ethiopian highlands will not diminish over time. Both assumptions are somewhat problematic.³

Needless to say, modernisation ideology is alive and well in Ethiopia, which in pursuing these multiple dam-building schemes is showing itself to be a classic 'high-modernist' state indeed (cf. Scott 1998: 4), bent on technology-driven 'development' and top-down planning at all cost by a self-declared all-knowing state elite. In this respect, there is a seamless continuity with earlier socialist-modernist planning in Ethiopia, which in the 1980s saw large-scale resettlement schemes under the previous, military-socialist *Derg* regime, with huge human cost and little economic returns (cf. Pankhurst and Piguet 2009). The common theme in both regimes is 'state building' via development in the fast-forward mode; and the mega-projects confirm the aims and policies of a state elite bent on establishing its undisputed hegemony domestically and internationally.

The massive investment in mega-dams and foreign land leases may for recent Afro-optimist observers mean the reaffirmation of 'Africa in the world' and indicate the hopeful 'economic upturn' of a neglected continent long seen as 'behind' others (cf. Juma 2011; Roxburgh *et al.* 2010). However, one should have an eye for the human

3 See 'Where the water ends: Africa's climate conflicts' (http://e360.yale.edu/feature/when_the_water_ends_africas_climate_conflicts/2331) Accessed 15 August 2011.

costs and the long-term social and environmental problems that may come in the dam's wake, and for which several expert warnings were given. Of course, it is easy to neglect them, especially when one is not a member of one of the local peoples that will be facing such problems. This is common among the new Afro-optimists who, in a new move of political correctness, appear to have an eye mainly for the economic growth figures and not the human elements, political democracy or the nature and durability problems of this growth. Mega-dams, however, pose many problems that should be considered holistically and not only economically (cf. Scudder 2005; Cernea 1997; D'Souza 2010). Local people often observe such a dam project as a constraining grid coming down on them and disconnecting them not only from their livelihoods but also from the political process. The analytical point is that the states in question redefine and move local people to detach them from the land so as to make it a 'free resource'. This is also reflected in the legal arrangement in Ethiopia: all land is still state property, not private; and there being no recognised cultural or even viable economic link between land and people dependent on it, the latter appear as 'displaceable' and as objects easily moved around.

The Gibe III project: what is it?

The Gibe III dam was started in 2006 and is still under construction, to be completed in 2013. Its location is 450 km southwest of the capital, Addis Ababa, on the border of the Wolaitta and the Dawro Zones.⁴ A work force of ca. 3500 people is busy working on it, on a large, double-zoned and fenced site virtually closed to the outside world.

The dam is to be a 245-m high barrage in the Gibe-Omo River (Gibe is the name of the upper course of the river up to the Gojeb tributary). The dam is a roller-compacted concrete dam with an associated hydroelectric power plant. Its power output is officially expected to be about 1870 Megawatt (MW), more than double the total electric capacity of Ethiopia from its 2007 level of 814 MW. Notably, in 2008 Ethiopia's total electrical power use was not more than 587 MW, so domestic demand is far below the projected production capacity (even below its capacity at the time). The Ethiopian government wants to use this and other dams as a resource for generating foreign revenues, planning electricity export to Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya. The dam is to be operated by the state-owned Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCo). Its initial costs were estimated at €1.47 bn (US\$1.9 bn); in August 2010 they had already risen to €1.7 bn, and are likely to be higher.

In June 2013 the dam reservoir (ca. 14 bn m³) will have to be filled to power the hydroelectric plant.⁵ This will take two or three years, during which the Omo River flow will greatly dwindle and directly impact riverbank livelihood systems downstream. The natural flow of the Omo River will be decisively changed in the long run, also because additional huge irrigation schemes are foreseen.⁶ The local seasonal flooding along

4 Maps of the Gibe III project area can be found in the EEPCo report (2008a), *Gibe III Environmental and Social Impact Assessment*, pp. 42–3.

5 See Salini Costruttori, 'Gibe III: the *Survival* figures are obviously incorrect', Press release, Rome, 30 March 2010.

6 See www.mursi.org/news-items/huge-irrigation-scheme-planned-for-the-lower-omo-valley (Accessed 2 June 2011), and PM Meles Zenawi's speech during the 13th Annual Pastoralists' Day celebrations, Jinka, South Omo, 25 January 2011.

the river bank zones, essential for the agrarian and pastoral livelihoods of ca. 180,000 people (see Turton 2010: 4) will be dramatically reduced. Local economic systems will thereby be affected, despite the promise in the official Gibe III impact assessment documents that an annual 10-day water release will try to imitate that flooding.⁷ But this is economically not helpful for local people. While not all local people can be assumed to have an inherent, ontological attachment to the land where they live or could not survive without it, social research has shown that for most communities a long-established, meaningful and economically significant bond exists between them and the local environment. Most of them prefer also to be consulted on future developments. But communities will probably have to move out, as prime grazing lands and cultivation sites will be alienated from them. Foreign and highland Ethiopian labourers (there is talk of 100,000) will move in, and local people will have little competitive power or inclination to work on the plantations on the lands expropriated from them – if they are allowed.

Environmental and social impact assessments (ESIA) of the dam have been made, as required by Ethiopian and international law. The first environmental assessment came in 2006 when construction started, but the more complete ESIA study came out only about two years later, i.e. when construction had already advanced significantly, and it drew a lot of criticism. Local people were consulted, but they were mainly local administrators (i.e. government people), and none could change the plans, only talk about some mitigating measures and compensation sums for what was to come. The approval process for the project was suspect, because there was no competitive bidding (thus easing the Ethiopian government's commanding role but leading to the withdrawal of various potential backers; cf. Mwanda 2011) and funding for the full construction costs was not secured. Only the African Development Bank in 2010 gave a loan of US\$250 million, and has generally not been critical of the project. Later the Italian government, in a bid to support the Italian construction company Salini Costruttori SpA, the contractors of the dam, provided hundreds of millions of US dollars as well. The World Bank and the European Investment Bank did not participate. In 2009 China, a close political and economic partner of the Ethiopian government, provided US\$500 million in equipment, funded by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC).

Dam studies – experiences so far

Large dams for hydroelectric power generation are making a comeback because they are seen as a quick road to 'clean energy' and, once the capital investment in the structures is made, a relatively reliable source of electricity is available. Due to the continent's natural features, the 'potential' for hydroelectric power generation in Africa is always said to be great. It has indeed become a new mantra of the development elite. Of Ethiopia it is often said in official documents that the country has the potential to generate 45,000

7 Turton cites a 2010 statement by Salini Costruttori, the Gibe III builders, from where it appears that the local people 'are expected to switch from flood-retreat agriculture to more modern forms of agriculture'. This statement reveals that 'the controlled flood is not, and possibly never has been seen by the dam builder as a permanent mitigating measure for downstream impacts' (2010: 6). It can be predicted that in, say, five to ten years' time, this conclusion will be vindicated.

MW in the future so that there is scope for much expansion – although this would mean that most if not all suitable gorges and rivers in the entire country would have to be dammed, and no attention would be paid to wider environmental, ecological, seismicity and agronomic variables (apart even from the landscape-aesthetic ones).

There is a respectable tradition of comparative dam studies, with many from anthropology (see Scudder 2005; Richter *et al.* 2010) and some of the conclusions are that, while a substantial domestic energy resource is usually created, the following drawbacks may occur: (a) significant environmental problems, among them loss of biodiversity, loss of agrarian land, land slide problems, water seepage and evaporation; (b) recurrent technical problems, such as silting of the reservoirs, seismic pressure and unexpected construction weaknesses discovered *after* operating the dam; (c) proper cost-benefit analyses are hardly made; livelihoods of people near the dam areas and downstream are negatively impacted, ranging from loss of lands and livelihoods to loss of resources and income, and displacement to poorer areas, rarely sufficiently compensated (cf. Cernea and Mathur 2008); (d) more health problems may appear among people close to the lake reservoirs (notably malaria or bilharzia; cf. Ligon *et al.* 1995; Tedros *et al.* 1999); and (e) local people had little say, if any, in any dam venture and government promises to compensate them or offer alternatives are rarely kept. Interestingly, on the basis of local evidence, many dams are being reassessed, for example the Chinese Three Gorges dam. China has recently admitted the serious long-term problems with its Three Gorges dam (Hvistendahl 2008; Watts 2011). But it has continued funding similar risky projects in Africa (Giles 2006), and still funds the current Ethiopian dam-building ventures.

In Ethiopia itself there is also a perennial problem of the *maintenance* of projects, structures and machines once built or installed, and of unforeseen environmental, socio-economic and engineering problems, usually acknowledged only when serious problems occur some years later. Upkeep of products delivered is weak, as is evident from the Beles and Tekkeze dams, damaging performance and durability. Remarkably, in the fever to build new dams the lessons of the past are not taken into account, not even by the donor countries and institutions providing the funding. Studies of the aftermath of various large Ethiopian dam projects (like the T'ana-Beles and the Tekkeze), however, have made clear that they were not an unmitigated success and have had disturbing social and environmental effects.⁸ Often small dams, while not so spectacular, are much more suitable, as they are less vulnerable to mechanical and engineering failure, avoid massive displacement and resettlement of people (cf. Richter *et al.* 2010), and pose fewer maintenance problems.

Relation of the Gibe III dam and the surrounding socio-economic and societal environment

Most prominent in the global discussion on the Gibe III dam's impact is not the threatened displacement of people in the immediate area of the dam, because most of

8 Cf. the analysis of an engineer on the drying out effect of the T'ana Beles scheme on Lake T'ana: Grawa Samuel (2011) T'ana hayq derqo, beSudan t'eref sint'allel' ['While Lake Tana dries up it [the water] is on display near the Sudan border'] (www.ethiomedias.com/andnen/tana_hayq_derqo.pdf Accessed 10 June 2011). See also Gebre (2009) on resettlement problems and the general demise of the Beles scheme (p. 123).

the lake gorge is indeed sparsely populated or uninhabited; only some 230 families were estimated to be moved, and the land lost is low-intensity pasture and hunting-gathering territory. The threat is to the livelihoods of ca. 200,000 people downstream (in Ethiopia) because of the disappearance of the floods and the recession of the water level (Turton 2010: 4). At least a similar number of people in Kenya will also be affected, due to the expected drying out of Lake Turkana and its delta, which may see a large drop of its water level (cf. Avery 2010), reduced fish stocks, and perhaps more salinity of the water so as to make it undrinkable and unsuitable for irrigation agriculture. In addition, the Lower Omo Valley as well as Lake Turkana, a unique desert lake with natural and economic value, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites (respectively since 1980 and 1997).⁹ The Valley is also an important location of hominid finds and ancient habitation. Near the dam site itself, parts of two medieval defence walls of the Walaitta and Dawro kingdoms will be flooded by the future lake. In July 2011 the World Heritage Committee of the UN called for a halt of the construction of Gibe III until all negative impacts of the dam had been independently investigated and evaluated.¹⁰ It advised the Ethiopian government to consider the universal heritage value of the Omo Valley and called upon it to fulfil its obligations to protect the sites. Needless to say, the call was brushed aside¹¹ by government spokesmen in the usual denial mode, with Ethiopia on the way to endanger universal heritage of humanity.

In southwest Ethiopia there are a number of ethnic groups living along the downstream Omo banks: the Bodi, Mursi, Nyangatom, Kwegu, Chai, Kara, Bashada, Me'en, and Dassanech, the latter living in and near the Omo delta near Lake Turkana. They will lose not only some of their hunting and gathering areas but, as noted, also their flood-retreat cultivation sites, which are currently an essential and stable food production niche in an area with precarious rainfall. In addition, fishing and livestock pasture areas will be sharply reduced and a general receding of groundwater reserves will be seen also. This will undermine food security (already precarious in the region) and trigger migrations and possibly more inter-group conflict. The government has been quick to promise water pumps to enhance irrigated agriculture along the river banks, but there are many practical and socio-cultural obstacles to this. And what the government basically seems to have in mind is to lease the lands to new investors for big irrigated agricultural schemes where displaced local people probably are envisaged to be wage labourers.

Kenyans, including some MPs and local NGOs, have lodged complaints¹² with Ethiopia because of the threats to Lake Turkana and the negative impact on the livelihoods of the Turkana, Elmolo, Rendille and other peoples, but – as expected – the Kenyan government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian government, agreeing to the dam without considering local effects in a (for them) marginal area in the semi-arid North.

9 See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/17> (Accessed 20 May 2011).

10 See A. Ashine, 'UN calls for suspension of giant Ethiopian hydropower dam', *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 28 July 2011; J. Mwanda, 'Ethiopia's world heritage site tribes threatened', *International News Magazine* (Sydney), 1 August 2011.

11 As reported in 'Ethiopia continues dam construction over UN objections', *Addis Fortune* (Addis Ababa), 7 August 2011.

12 Most recently in August 2011: see 'MPs join opposition to Ethiopian dam', *Capital FM* (Nairobi), 10 August 2010.

There is no doubt that due to the dam construction the surrounding socio-economic and societal environment will be irretrievably altered and that local peoples will have to adapt and change (cf. Angelo 2010) to the point of abandoning most of their way of life. There is no evidence that they will be given a choice in this. Formerly 'isolated', now tourist-visited 'tribal' groups in the area will be more visible and connected to the wider national society. Education, migration, socio-cultural assimilation and new economic activities will follow, perhaps preceded by a phase of disorientation and more local group conflict. No one in the local population doubts that income loss and economic decline will affect the people impacted by the dam. In general, the promises of compensation and provision of services are not believed. There are reports that protesters can land in jail.¹³ In practice, the possibility to resist seems slim due to government pressure and military presence. While previous studies of the impacts of dams (Richter *et al.* 2010; Scudder 2005; Cernea 2004) have advised government and aid agencies to consult the locals and make them a partner in change, nothing of this kind seems to occur in Ethiopia, except in a very formal, top-down manner. The enormous body of sociological and anthropological knowledge on these societies, and on their value for the comparative study of humankind, of local ecology, or of environmental practices, is bypassed.

In addition, a general expectation for the wider natural environment in the dam project areas is that species decline, deforestation and loss of biodiversity will result, not only in the immediate dam location area but also downstream, because of the likely receding of the river and of the lake and its changing chemical composition (with a likelihood of it becoming more salty and alkaline).

The EEPCo Impact Assessments as well as critical reports by various concerned experts, NGOs, advocacy groups and local people all indicate substantial effects and impacts on the environment, socio-economic systems, livelihoods, and the social organisation and culture of the people living near the dam or downstream. This is, of course, to be expected in view of all the studies made on dams elsewhere. Only the EEPCo reports make nothing of it, suggesting easy adjustments. Neither does the media noise about the 'sustainable development' impact of the Gibe III dam (and of the others planned), claimed during a conference in Addis Ababa in 2011,¹⁴ demonstrate that for all those impacted by the dams the idea of sustainability is valid. In the recommendations of this conference,¹⁵ nothing is said on the role, value and knowledge of local peoples and stakeholders living in the dam area.

Divergent views on the dam

At least five, often antagonistic, positions can be distinguished on the use and impact of the Gibe III dam, touching upon matters of basic engineering, economic use,

13 As has happened with those objecting to large-scale land acquisitions, see Ed Butler, 'Land grab fears for Ethiopian rural communities', BBC news message, 16 October 2010 (www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-11991926) Accessed 5 May 2011. Survival International even reported that human rights abuse was already on the way among local opponents of the dam: 'Exposed: Ethiopia gives farmland to foreigners while thousands starve' (www.survivalinternational.org/news/7518) Accessed 5 August 2011.

14 Sponsored by the Ethiopian government and the International Hydropower Association (IHA), held 31 March–1 April 2011; see <http://www.h4sd.info> (Accessed 19 August 2011).

15 Downloadable from www.h4sd.info (Accessed 20 August 2011).

environmental impact but also on those of state legitimacy, governance, developmental obsessions, and the place of and respect for the local people affected. I summarise them below.

Government positions

The Ethiopian government, led by the EPRDF as the sole ruling (vanguard) party for 20 years, expresses total and unconditional commitment to dam building in order to develop the country. Dams are seen as necessary, and as the best way to attain energy self-sufficiency and boost the power of central government, who will own them and operate them. Few if any objections were listened to – not domestically, not internationally. Public debate on the dam construction has been absent, it having become a dogma that this was the right road to ‘poverty eradication and economic growth’. Interests of local people or the environment seem immaterial, and any problems resulting from the dam ‘can be solved’. For critics, it is a case of state hubris in the classical sense.

Ethiopia’s PM has repeatedly expressed the state’s (ruling party’s) attitude best. In August 2010 he vowed to complete the dam ‘at any cost’, saying about critics of the dam that ‘They don’t want to see developed Africa; they want us to remain undeveloped and backward to serve their tourists as a museum.’¹⁶ And in a speech on 2010 ‘Pastoralists’ Day’ in the southern town of Jinka, he said:

Our efforts to build a dam on the Omo River to eliminate the flood, to create a huge irrigation system and give pastoralists a sustainable income and a modern life, are facing roadblocks. Our limited capacity to execute this work, and limited financial aid, did not allow us to go as fast as we wanted to. There are some people who want to block our freedom to use our rivers, and to save our people from poverty.

These words speak for themselves; no comment needed. He continued:

They just want to keep the pastoralists as a tourist attraction and make sure no development happens in pastoral areas. They team up with the people who don’t want us to use our rivers to broadcast their propaganda. There can’t be anyone more concerned for our environmental conservation than we are. We are determined to speed up our development in an environmentally-friendly way. We want our people to have a modern life and we won’t allow our people to be a case study of ancient living for scientists and researchers.¹⁷

The rest of the speech contained promises that all ‘backwardness’ of the local people and their civilisations would be addressed. In this well-meant government discourse there is no reflection on the value of alternative views or on the local knowledge or the wishes of those people – their narrative is not taken seriously, because they are backward, ignorant and not yet sharing in the graces of development (although all these terms are of course very relative).

16 In *New Business Ethiopia* (an Ethiopian weekly), 11 August 2010.

17 Speech by PM Meles Zenawi during the 13th Annual Pastoralists’ Day celebrations, Jinka, South Omo Zone, 25 January 2011.

All state institutions and the ruling party follow suit. There are the state media, the pro-government website Walta,¹⁸ and the various Ministries. Also EEPCo, as chief agency responsible for the dam projects, gave its views. For instance, a report by the EEPCo Head Office of August 2010 pictured no negative consequences of the Gibe III dam whatsoever, on the surrounding area or on the peoples downstream, nor on the biology and ecology of Lake Turkana (EEPCo 2010). Remarkably, even no hint was made here to any of the concerns mentioned in EEPCo's own previous 2008 reports (EEPCo 2008a, 2008b), where adverse effects were at least recognised. The Gibe III project also has its own website,¹⁹ which has no word on possible problems and mainly sings praises of the project and its progress.

Also a significant part of the Ethiopian public, including in the diaspora, is proud of the dam construction, seeing it as 'empowering Ethiopia' and raising its importance on the African continent. They often adopt a blanket nationalist economic point of view, countering critics with the statement that Ethiopia has the right to development and that (Western) critics are 'jealous', or 'denigrating Ethiopia'. No one would deny this right 'to develop'. But in this approach the diversity of local interests and the risk of negative impacts on certain peoples are all too easily bypassed. There is little if any evidence that recent international conventions and declarations adopted in the UN on the rights of 'tribal' or indigenous peoples are being respected.²⁰ Here the modernisation discourse of the government has made converts to the extent that any discussion of such eventual problems and disadvantages is avoided or delegitimised. The larger part of the politically quite vocal Ethiopian diaspora, however, is against mega-dam building, seemingly not primarily because of the specific project (Gibe III) but because of their general political objections to the regime in place.²¹

International financial institutions and international law and monitoring agencies

These groups of commentators and policy-making institutions have a facilitating role, in practice usually supporting national developmental efforts and plans of developing countries, providing expert advice, financial aid and legal counsel. They point to legal obligations, impose conditions and call for following internationally agreed upon protocols, such as environmental and social impact assessments and the legal representation of stakeholders. Among these groups are the World Bank, the IMF, the African Development Bank, the European Investment Bank and USAID. Also the World Commission on Dams (WCD), set up by two unlikely partners, the World Bank and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), can be included here. In 2000, this Commission issued a report stating that decisions to build large hydroelectric dams must be guided by 'indigenous people's free, prior and informed

18 See 'Gilgel Gibe III's detractors continue their campaign', Walta, 26 February 2011 (www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25560&Itemid=96).

19 See www.gibe3.com.et (Accessed 19 September 2011).

20 See the UNHCR *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* 1989 (no. 169), the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (Resolution 47/135, December 1992) and the UN General Assembly *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (A/61/L.67) of 7 September 2007.

21 Some also object to the generation of the huge debt that may result.

consent to the project' (WCD 2000). But this principle has not been applied (yet) to the Gibe III dam. In its 2000 report the WCD also did not provide an estimate of the impact of river flow alteration (to be major in the case of the dammed Omo) on the downstream peoples and ecosystems (Richter *et al.* 2010: 15), although indications are that such impact will be far-reaching. Occasionally, these international agencies voice objections over the non-competitive bidding procedures for construction or on the absence or neglect of proper (i.e. independent) environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs).

This category of institutions also remains rather dependent on national governments in developing countries and is also strongly embedded in, and subservient to, international 'donor discourse', notably of the larger powers. Nevertheless, a study by Avery (2010) for the African Development Bank has outlined a few major problems of the project for the Lake Turkana environment and economy.

The world press and critical NGOs

Most criticisms, often rather alarmist, on dam building and impact assessment have been offered by the international press, and increasingly by many advocacy civil society groups and NGOs. While the first aim to represent the whole gamut of interests and describe the initial problems encountered, the latter make usually an unambiguous choice against dam building and take the side of the people affected who are losing their lands, livelihoods and socio-cultural heritage.

Characteristic of world press reporting has been an influential 2009 article by the BBC's Peter Greste, called 'The dam that divides Ethiopians'.²² Journalists now find it difficult to access the site of the dam and are rarely accorded interviews. This again leads to more suspicion, criticism and breakdown of dialogue.

Various NGOs and interest groups are active in this domain of dam monitoring, among them International Rivers, StopGibe3,²³ Survival International (2009, 2010), Friends of Lake Turkana,²⁴ Indigenous Peoples of Africa, Campagna per la Riforma della Banca Mondiale (2008), and the Bank Information Center and some have been joined by big names, such as Richard Leakey, the Kenyan scientist and conservationist.²⁵ They are usually adamantly opposed to the building of the Gibe dams and request governments, donor countries and international institutions to critically approach dam projects, to apply the relevant legal clauses and guidelines for evaluating and monitoring, and often to withhold funding for it if all 'stakeholders' are not consulted. They also organised petitions (for instance, on World Water Day 2011²⁶) and targeted demonstrations near the headquarters of such organisations. Characteristic headings of International Rivers articles are: 'Big dams: bringing poverty not power', and

22 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7959444.stm> (Accessed 7 February 2011), with accompanying video reports. Also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7959814.stm> (Accessed 10 February 2011).

23 See www.stopgibe3.org/pages/Main.php (Accessed 28 June 2011).

24 See www.friendsoflaketurkana.org (Accessed 10 June 2011).

25 See <http://richardleakey.wildlifedirect.org/2009/02/03/climate-change-and-japans-krill-fishing-are-devastating-the-antarctic> (Accessed 9 October 2011).

26 See <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/7099> (Accessed 4 September 2011), mentioning that 400 organisations had signed a petition against the dam.

'Ethiopia's Gibe 3: sowing hunger and conflict.'²⁷ Survival International (2010) noted: 'Giant dam to devastate 200,000 tribal people in Ethiopia'.²⁸ Ikal Angelei, director of Friends of Lake Turkana, said in a statement in February 2011: 'Construction of Gibe III is the most outrageous social injustice of our time.'²⁹ The approach of these organisations is ecological or conservation-based and therefore legitimate, but also protective and perhaps paternalistic to the local people and their ethno-cultural traditions, thereby tending to somewhat underestimate their adaptive capacities and agency. These organisations exert significant pressure but have mostly not been successful in engaging the Ethiopian government or the international institutions in a meaningful dialogue or exchange of views on the dam projects, and as a result both parties become even more antagonistic.

Ethiopian diaspora political opposition

As domestic debate in Ethiopia, as well as civil society action critical of the dam ventures within Ethiopia, is barred (notably following a very restrictive NGO law issued in 2009), the Internet is a major site for debates on controversial political issues, including on the Gibe dam scheme. Websites of Ethiopian opposition groups are very vocal (cf. Lyons 2007) and contain often strongly voiced but often well-documented critiques on Ethiopian party/government policies. Interestingly, government people, especially the Prime Minister or top policy advisors, often respond to such critiques in their own speeches and statements, despite the fact that the Internet users and the general public in Ethiopia are prevented from accessing the diaspora websites, because of censorship by the sole Internet provider in Ethiopia (ETC).

The often vociferous tone of the diaspora cyber-criticisms undermines the substance of relevant critiques issued on the same websites,³⁰ and serves to polarise the issues. Both the government and its radical critics thus construct a mutual recrimination discourse that hardly advances debate on the merits of any policy, including dam building. One website, for example, speaks of 'dictatorial death dams'³¹, another of 'looming eco-genocide' due to the 'destructive path' of Gibe III.³² Such epithets cloud the discussion and do neither good service to local people nor contribute to properly evaluating the serious impact of the dams.

Independent experts and researchers

Several independent observers, experts and scholars have offered their reasoned views on the Gibe controversy, giving technical, economic or social-science analyses of the entire context or on aspects of it, such as the environmental and biodiversity impacts.

27 See www.internationalrivers.org for such papers (Accessed 12 September 2011).

28 See <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/5683> (Accessed 16 June 2011).

29 See 'Groups to protest against China-funded dam', at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201102210227.html> (Accessed 20 June 2011).

30 Such sites also contain expert assessments that make good points, among them, Samuel and Samson (2010), Mitchell (2009) and Johnston (2009, 2010).

31 See: www.ethiopianism.net/?cat=239 (Accessed 15 August 2011).

32 See Khadija Sharife (2010) 'East Africa's looming famine – Gibe III' (www.huffingtonpost.com/khadija-sharife/east-africas-looming-fami_b_577789.html Accessed 5 April 2011).

Some called for following accepted international procedures of social assessment and compensation, participatory policy, alternative livelihood procurement, and human rights respect. Examples are Mitchell (2009), Samuel and Samson (2010, although on Gibe II), Johnston (2009), ARWG (2009), the SOGREAH report (2010) and Turton (2010). Some social scientists who know the Omo area well also have commented, for example, in journalists' reports,³³ but few fieldwork-based contributions have yet been made by social science researchers (except Turton 2010 and Johnston 2009, 2010) on attitudes to the dam and its possible impacts. There are already a significant number of studies allowing politicians, policy makers, researchers and constructors to picture and take into account the 'pre-dam social conditions' (Richter *et al.* 2010: 25) of the people to be affected. As I suggested above, it is advisable and legally warranted to use this corpus of knowledge that sociologists, historians, geographers, anthropologists and others have produced on these peoples over the past decades. It can help to understand the history, the ecological management, social systems and also the humanity of these societies, to assess their social and cultural features, and understand the future costs that these peoples affected by dam projects may have to pay.³⁴ This knowledge can then also be drawn upon to design realistic 'mitigation measures' and adaptive mechanisms, to be facilitated by the state. In a recent article in *Nature*, Tollefson (2011) noted that at least a 'mechanism for evaluating, and perhaps mitigating, the impact of dams *before they are built*' [my emphasis, J.A.] would be advisable. This seems rational and self-evident, but not all those involved are convinced of this or can even imagine it. All independent work on the Gibe project concludes that the social and environmental impact aspects were not considered with the necessary amount of caution and sensitivity and consistently wish away any problems.

The local people

I discuss the local people here last, because, characteristically, little is known of their ideas and opinions. There is a large gap in knowledge, both about their exact relation to the lands they inhabit as well as their viewpoints: they were not asked or rarely consulted by policy makers, experts or independent researchers, and as yet no one can speak for them. They are not even recognised as 'indigenous' (see note 35) by the Ethiopian government. But several media articles contain interviews with local people, and various social scientists, including some anthropologists, have given estimates, based on in-depth knowledge and recent visits to the area. But clearly more comprehensive research is needed. In an influential BBC article, one of the Mursi community leaders said that they were never officially informed of the dam and that 'We will suffer because there will be no more floods... I don't think the government likes the Omo tribes.

33 See the BBC report at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7959814.stm> (Accessed 10 February 2011).

34 There is also the international context, already referred to above: the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted by the UN on 13 September 2007 states, *inter alia*, that 'States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources' (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html) Accessed 2 May 2011.

They are going to destroy us.' Nyangatom people cited said that they did not believe or understand the government in its promises of providing irrigation schemes.³⁵

Most of the 'consulting' of local people seems to have been done by the Gibe III project *Environmental and Social Impact Assessment* (EEPCo 2008a, with another one in January 2009 by CESI and Mid-Day Consulting 2009), for which the authors stated to have talked to about 2000 people. But only 80 were from directly affected Lower Omo area ethnic groups, most of them administrators (EEPCo 2008a: 198–200), and the findings and measures proposed were minimal (EEPCo 2008b: 158). The *Additional Study on Downstream Impact* (EEPCo 2008c) was very thorough, but again very meagre on community consultation (pp. 160–2). Informants' input could not change anything, because the terms were biased. The problem was also, as said above, that these social assessments came almost two years after the construction of the dam had started and with all plans already determined and approved by the state authorities. In addition, the experiences so far of impact assessment and redress mechanisms in similar grand schemes, such as T'ana Beles, Tekkeze and resettlement projects, do not inspire much confidence. In view of land and water scarcity, poorer environmental conditions, loss of livestock holdings, policies of ethnic closure that have reduced the absorptive capacity of local societies to resettlers, and low compensation sums and inputs provided by the government, people downstream will face, certainly in the initial stages, serious declines of livelihood and well-being.

Important information on the local situation and people's views was also provided by Turton (2010), a long-time researcher and expert on the Lower Omo region. His contribution, based on visits in 2010 to the impact area downstream, confirmed the many insecurities and adverse consequences feared by local ethnic groups. Interestingly, he noted that one of the reasons given by the Ethiopian authorities for building the dam was to prevent seasonal floods that allegedly had killed 'hundreds of people', notably in 2006 (EEPCo 2008c: 141). But in interviews with Turton, local Dassanetch and Nyangatom individuals were not able to recall any victims of such a flood. Floods do occur, but people are used to them and the casualty figures seem to be incorrect and exaggerated.

My own interviews with representatives of two other ethnic groups from the Lower Omo area in Addis Ababa in September 2010 and October 2011 revealed great apprehension about the uncertain future (for example, they expect more food insecurity), with a rejection of projected new irrigation-based mega-plantations on their grazing lands, and even fears of group conflicts due to disputes about grazing land and water in the wake of the dam construction. They also had little confidence in the compensation sums and the plans for irrigation and pump installation that were promised. They were ambivalent about the expected loss of tourist income (because this phenomenon was already contested), and also rejected official statements by the authorities that they had a 'backward civilisation' or were all 'poor' or 'unemployed'. This is indeed one of the most sensitive points: it is one thing to observe that local people could benefit more from measured and considerate state support, but for 'developers'

35 Other local views are presented in the short video documentary by M. Angelo (www.youtube.com/watch?v=otpu8bcOzv0 Accessed 2 September 2011) of the Kara people, and in the campaign video on Turkana Lake made by International Rivers (www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mFjZnKeOnE&feature=player_embedded#at=17 Accessed 2 September 2011).

to deny them (they are also citizens) the human and survival value of their ways of life is problematic, to say the least.

The dam may in theory carry benefits for the local people. But seeing this impending decline in livelihoods, living spaces and environment (cf. Richter *et al.* 2010: 15), and the constant denigration of their so-called ‘primitive and backward way of life’, as expressed in official state documents, as well as the bypassing of their existence and interests, does not bode well (RNW 2011). The discourse of belittling the people and seeing their sacrifices unquestioningly as necessary for the ‘greater good’ recalls the long historical experience of suffering that rural Ethiopians have endured (cf. Dessalegn 2009: 24 on the highland peasants, admirably expressing this). This condition of suffering may now be entering a new phase, this time affecting the southern agro-pastoralists.

These five categories of ‘stakeholders’ hardly meet in a shared discursive space, despite efforts to redefine and reshape reality: some because they do not feel the need (like the state and some of the international players), others because they appeal to reason and public opinion only or assume the role of attorney for local peoples (advocacy groups, activists), or are powerless (local peoples). Neither is there a legal process for negotiating the plans and adapting or confronting them with customary laws and local practices that have been resilient for so long: state policy is a non-negotiable space.

‘Governance’ aspects: the production of dispensable subjects?

The last category of voices discussed above was that of the local people in the lower Gibe-Omo river basin. Here the nature of governance in neo-modernist states is most clearly articulated. The resurging development discourse and the economic–technocratic approach to natural and social engineering confirms local people as obstacles, as ‘resistant material’ that has to be processed and treated in a specific manner. They are seen as having little or no specific contribution to offer. Their practical, or as Scott (1998: 6–7, 335) called it *metis*, knowledge is not deemed relevant. Their status and alleged socio-cultural ‘backwardness’ can be remedied by displacement, re-education and training, so as to allow them to ‘partake’ of modernity and development. No tolerance is displayed of their customary livelihoods because they are declared by state leaders and policy-makers as ‘non-sustainable’. (This is no doubt the reason why these pastoral peoples and cultivators have survived in this area for hundreds of years...).

As a matter of fact, the global discourse on Millennium Development Goals and development emanating from donor countries and UN agencies constantly reiterates this point of ‘backwardness’—despite the formal calls made in their research reports to properly deal with human development factors. This global discourse was taken over uncritically and carried further by the Ethiopian state—there is no effort to modify or build on *local* models and approaches to development; it hereby falls back on the old pattern of the ‘politics of emulation’ (cf. Clapham 2006), seeking again models and solutions from abroad. Obviously Ethiopia is not the only case, but it is indicative of the wider trend and goes to show the pervasiveness of the global, prescriptive model of development. Only time will tell whether the Ethiopian state can keep up its claims to control socio-political processes or at some point make compromises in its practices of governance.

Focusing on the issue of 'subject formation', I come back to Scott's pioneering analysis (1998) of 'seeing-like-a-state mechanisms'. He claimed (1998: 4–5) that four characteristics are usually recognisable in state efforts at social engineering and making subject populations 'legible' to the state: (a) a simplifying, administrative ordering of nature and society; (b) a high-modernist ideology geared to the expansion of production, the use of a 'scientific-technical' approach and planning, and a quest to master nature; (c): an authoritarian state willing to use coercive power to realise its aims; and (d) a prostrate civil society incapable of effectively resisting those plans. It is no exaggeration to say that in Ethiopia these conditions have been fulfilled. The issue of the decentering of citizens' political relevance and agency is enhanced in the Ethiopian dam schemes because of the accompanying plans to start massive, foreign-run irrigation schemes and plantations to be stocked with thousands of foreign imported workers and management. This socio-economic population engineering may yield profits for the state treasury and increase agricultural exports. But it will also underline the disempowerment of local people (who are not enabled to take the lead in rural development) and thus confirms their subject status. The foreign worker communities are not accountable to anyone but the Ethiopian government and, being dependent on it, they cannot ask for rights and will not strike. Thus central state power is strengthened, local citizens' status diminished. Some critics have labelled this innovative form of governance as state feudalism. The concomitant result is that the state's subjects are, in a way, dispensable, or as Tanya Li suggested, 'surplus' (2009: 68): they have little political autonomy and are accorded only marginal agency – at least in the regions discussed here. In the case of the peoples of Lower Omo region, a *cultural* dimension is added to it: they are always declared to be in need of reform and 'civilising' to bring them into line with modernity and with the dominant society's norms (which apparently have no problems and are the ideal).

Conclusion: the clash of narratives and the (un)making of political subjects

Dam building in developing countries is a prime locus of state assertion and governance claims and can certainly prove to be a beneficial investment in the energy infrastructure of a developing country. As such, a categorical judgment on the (un)desirability of dams is not in order, in general or on the Gibe III dam. Problematic is, however, that their development and construction are in many countries conceived as inviolable exercises immune to critique, negotiation or amendment. This includes Ethiopia. In line with the authoritarian nature of its political system and the virtual imperviousness of the political elite to consultative debate or compromise, dam building has become a national developmental obsession in the country, and one that in practice cannot be questioned. Citizens may be informed and 'consulted', but they cannot alter the plans – this has been clear in all the official statements made. This underlines that the making of dams in Ethiopia, as elsewhere (cf. Mitchell 2002: 21, 38, 45, on Egypt), is clearly also an exercise in state-making and regime consolidation. Techno-economic projects conducted by central state authorities are presented as depoliticised, 'necessary' ventures but (re)define the powers of the state, advance its hegemonic governance model, and shape citizens in the process: displaceable, expendable subjects that can be relocated and re-educated. In some cases this entails the typical unreflected, modernist approach to

citizen making, ordering people to leave behind their 'backward ways of life'. That this approach and the policies resulting from it may even be in contravention to the letter and spirit of national constitutional clauses seems not to bother anyone. It is thus remarkable to see how resilient the old *topoi* of top-down state-making and 'disciplining' are, even in this global day and age. The locals, with their 'vernacular' or *métis* knowledge (Scott 1998) of the socio-economic conditions and ecology of their own society, are not appreciated and are, in a political sense, 'surplus' subjects in the wider scheme of things.

In addition, the apparent incommensurability of the various discursive accounts or positions of the Ethiopian dam project and its likely impact, as outlined above, is produced by the very nature of developmental governance and power as practised by the sovereign surveillance state and its ruling party. Inheritor of a statist if not Marxist political ideology turned developmentalist, it sees its mode of non-negotiable governance as the preferred way to secure domestic stability as well as international funding.

In the ongoing global efforts to raise GDP levels and enhance development, conceived materially and 'universally', in most countries the ecological resources dependent on *métis* knowledge and management are in danger of being irreparably damaged, and the socio-cultural structures replete with such local, practical and often adaptive skills are sidelined or devalued. The totalising and simplifying narrative of statecraft in the modernising mode – with states as a kind of franchise of a transnational institutional discourse – has indeed received new leases of life in the current competitive, globalising conditions, despite the planetary crisis of social and environmental management³⁶ and the limits of the unfettered economic growth models.

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36 It is marginal to the subject of this paper, but on the aggravating global ecological crises see, for example, Leigh (2005), Rockström *et al.* (2009), Vörösmarty *et al.* (2010) and Edwards (2010).

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